Queering Translation

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As the world becomes increasingly transnational, and borders between sovereign nation-states become more permeable, the interstitial spaces produced in the encounters between cultures become salient sites for addressing how multiple lines of social invention, domination, and resistance continue to be activated both within national borders as well as across them. My own work, situated at the intersections of postcolonial and queer studies, that is, at the borders between two disciplines, has addressed how sexuality has operated as a vector of social organisation and cultural arrangement in emergent democracies in specific locations in the postcolonial world. Yet how does the study of borders, and their deconstruction and rearrangement, impinge upon discourses and practices of sexual dissidence as they circulate across the globe? Taking this further, I would like to address in this essay what these global circulations may imply for translation as a mediating and transcultural practice. An obvious beginning point for me in doing postcolonial queer work has been to explore the gender and sexual politics of translation by asking how to work with the specificity of the term 'queer,' which has its origins in western Anglophonic cultures, when translating texts from non-Anglophonic and non-western contexts, as well as texts from the past, which may not use terms translatable to modern, western understandings of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or queer identities. What new translation issues arise when one recognises that in some postcolonial cultures, for example, terms for same-sex sexual practices may be inscribed discursively in indigenous languages, but may name gender-defined *performances* of same-sex desires for which equivalent terms may not exist in modern European languages? This does not mean that 'queerness,' as a concept or cultural referent, does not exist in non-western languages or cultures, or in cultures of the past, but

that it is always already differentially inscribed, and connects critically with a key issue in contemporary translation studies to the extent that translation is not merely about language alone. At the same time, the politics of gender and sexuality are not intended to override translation studies in this essay as I am interested in asking how translation theory may be broadened through the pressures of queer theoretical orientations, while asking the extent to which translation operates as a queer praxis. Moreover, how can translation studies challenge the somewhat still prevalent Anglophonic biases of queer studies?

As I've already mentioned, we have come to understand translation not as a mere linguistic process or linear operation but as intimately intertwined with new forms of textual and cultural *production*, exceeding the *reproduction* of a text from one language into another. Catherine Porter, who organised a Presidential Forum on translation at the Modern Language Association's annual convention in 2009, reminds us that translation is a multidimensional site of cross-lingual correspondence on which diverse social tasks are performed (Porter 2010: 6), including, I would add, those pertaining to gender and sexuality. As comparatists, we are trained to read texts and cultures *relationally* rather than to look at what is thought to be given ontologically. This relational focus, what Emily Apter has described as 'the places where languages touch' (Apter 2010: 61), is at the heart of translation work, creating crossings not only across linguistic and national borders, but across social categories as well, producing new, hybrid forms of meaning and new knowledge through these very encounters, even calling into question the actual borderisations, linguistic or otherwise, at the point at which they are crossed. Writing on translation as a form of hybridity and cross-cultural negotiation, Alfonso de Toro argues that he prefers the term *translation* over the more commonly used term in French *traduction* because the latter, he says, is linked in a rather limited way only to the linguistic and semantic domains of working across languages. The linguistic and semantic domains he mentions are part of the broader term *translation*, but

translation also includes the spaces where various cultural systems, in addition to language, intersect, converge, and transform. Because language is both cultural and ideological, that is, a social invention, the act of translation, according to De Toro, will always already produce an array of new codifications, textualities, and cultural meanings, as well as deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations of social and discursive systems (De Toro 2009: 80), rather than simply repeating what is thought to be *given* in the so-called 'original' text in another linguistic code. Indeed, Derridean theories of signification remind us that all language works by a process of translatability, whereby one signifier continually replaces, and simultaneously displaces, another through an endless play of signification in the absence or deferral of a final meaning.[1] In translation work, in working between languages, this suggests a sort of epistemological pause, or an attempt, as Apter argues, to allow contradictory meanings to emerge so that complexities are not oversimplified; this enables us, she says, to pay attention to what gets lost in translation and to activate translation *as theory* (Apter 2010: 53). Certainly, analyses of gender and sexual difference(s) in translation work can provoke new sites of knowledge production, as well as stimulate significant shifts in social identities and categories, while focusing attention on the complex and nuanced ways in which gender and sexuality are inscribed in languages which becomes elided when one works in and through only a single language. Moreover, are the very terms used for gender and sexual identities in one language necessarily reducible to equivalents in other languages, particularly when one works across historical periods and/or across cultures? Attention to these very transgressions, these slippages of signification, these differences, when we work across languages and cultures is, in effect, a comparatively queer praxis.

To give specific textual examples, in researching the politics of sexual dissidence emerging out of post-apartheid South Africa in the 1990s, and the effects in the region, I was very struck by work I had found on the affective and sometimes erotic bonds common

between women in Lesotho which often start during adolescence and often continue alongside heterosexual marriage, whereby one women refers to her 'very special friend' as *motsoalle* in Sesotho language (Nthunya 1995: 4). In writing about these relationships, anthropologist Judith Gay found that the affective ties between women usually include an intense level of genital eroticism where women are able to exercise a great deal of initiative and autonomy, unlike the formal rules of marriage, where they are constrained by the male-dominated family and migrant labour systems. But the romantic and sensual bonds that women initiate and sustain often continue alongside and are compatible with conventional heterosexual marriage (Gay 1986: 111), and frequently serve as the primary erotic relationship for the women and the basis for lifelong support. It would be erroneous, however, to translate the Sesotho term *motsoalle* (to describe intimate bonds between Masotho women) as 'lesbian.' Even the use of the term 'very special friend,' which is the way in which Limakatso Kendall has translated *motsoalle* in the short life writings she has collected and translated by Masotho women who speak of their intimate lives, does not quite name the relationships precisely, especially if there is an erotic component to them, and the translated term serves also as a sort of euphemism to mask the potentialities of same-sex eroticism within the relationships. This implies, then, a moving toward, and a meticulous lingering over the space of that which is not stated directly, as well as critical attention to the transgressive, anti-normative spaces where contradictory or deferred meanings may emerge. This is the space where we look for what Emily Apter has described, in citing the late critic Barbara Johnson, the various pressure points lost in translation (Apter 2010: 53). These slippages, these silences, these spaces of indeterminacy, these irreducible remainders in working across languages are the very spaces where desire resides and they also instantiate translation as a queer praxis.

To give another example, I am now researching emergent forms of sexual dissidence as sites of cultural struggle as represented in new francophone 'queer' writing emerging from the Maghreb. I find the Maghreb to be a politically and intellectual compelling area of comparative enquiry because both feminist writing and writing by lesbians and gay men in the region, and in diaspora, have located sites of resistance in the interstices between multiple languages and cultures, thus pointing to the importance of an even more politicised comparative praxis and the need in queer studies to examine sexual difference(s), and the indigenous cultures from which they have emerged, relationally rather than as self-contained and autonomous. A very vibrant tradition of Maghreb feminist writing in French, especially in Algeria, emerging within, and not separate from, existing social formations has attempted to blur the generic borders between personal autobiography and history; I am thinking here of the work of Algerian feminist writer, Assia Djebar (especially her book *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*), which is often double-voiced and circulates nomadically in the spaces between multiple languages, histories, and cultures. Djebar often punctuates hegemonic narratives with in her own experiences and interjections and those of other women as a strategy for interrupting and rewriting colonial as well as postcolonial history and attempts by cultural nationalists to replace one history by another through erasing the significance of women's lives within the colonial history of Algeria. Somewhat similar to Djebar's blurring of the borders between history and autobiography, Rachid O, in his autobiographical work *L'Enfant ébloui*, dispels myths around the development of masculine gender identification through a separation from femininity, which also resists, metaphorically perhaps, a broader, though normative, postcolonial narrative from feminised colony, ideologically penetrated by the European coloniser, to the hypermasculinised nation-state. Rachid's narrator writes of embracing femininity at a young age when he is allowed to go to the women's hammam with female relatives until about the age of seven. He writes: 'C'est un endroit, le hammam, où les

femmes sont intimes et rigolent entre elles" (O. 1995: 33) [The women's hammam is a space where women are close and enjoy each other's company—my translation]. Rachid O's use of the French verb *rigoler*, in describing the intimate bonds women share in the hammam takes the adjective form *rigolo* or *rigolote*, which can mean *plaisant*, *amusant* or *curieux*, *étrange*, or in English, 'pleasant,' in the first sense, but also 'odd' or 'queer'; there is a space here of uncertainty and ambiguity. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, here 'meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages' (Spivak 2012: 313). More importantly, the term *rigoler*, does not quite translate into English from the multiple layered meanings it may have in French in the context of young Arab Muslim boy's embrace of, rather than his separation from, the feminine cultural codes, meanings, and symbols in the women's hammam in Morocco.

At the same time, translation work implies that analyses of gender and sexual difference are not reducible to feminist and queer studies respectively; rather they intersect with each other as well as with other disciplines and modes of enquiry as I've argued elsewhere (see Spurlin 1998). As Christopher Larkosh argues, working across languages can both complement and question the ways in which we think about gender and sexuality within established disciplines, such as feminist and queer studies, whilst challenging our sense of certainty around our own gender and sexual positionality (Larkosh 2011: 4), through bringing to the foreground the slippages I mentioned earlier, and the gaps in the spaces between languages and cultures. This implies, then, a radical rethinking of the traditional ways in which translation work has been gendered, whereby the translated text is feminised, always already referentially beholden to the more authoritative 'original' text. As Carolyn Shread points out, this traditional view of translation's fidelity to the master text reinvents the masculinist privileging of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and independence of the individual in highly gendered terms (Shread 2011: 52). Yet taking a view of femininity as multi-layered,

as ensconced by severality, as more than or less than one (Shread 2011: 52), calls to mind Hélène Cixous's notion of *l'écriture feminine.* As Tutun Mukherjee reminds us, Cixous uses the metaphor of the heterogeneity and multiplicity of female sexuality to celebrate feminine writing as transcending linearity, univocality, and the fixity of phallogocentric discourse through excess and circularity, thereby challenging phallogocentric ways of reading and articulating the world (Mukherjee 2011: 135). (Re)gendering translation studies in this manner also politicises it, and points to the multiple strategies and approaches to explain a text's movement from one language and culture to another, whilst exposing the translation of a text 'faithfully' from one language to another as an impossible task (Mukherjee 2011: 133). Preserving the gendered binary between the sovereign (masculinised) original text and the peripheral (feminised) translated text depolticises translation by evacuating the ideological inflections inherent to a textual practice like translation that operates in the very spaces where disparate languages and cultures meet and clash. Moreover, it fails to situate translation socially and masks relations of power in the very act of translation, such as the ways in which translation historically may served the apparatus of colonialism as well as resisted it.

Dismantling the gendered binary further calls to mind the performativity of translation to the extent that translation does not merely facilitate communication across languages, as my examples show, but is a site of struggle in the negotiation and production of meaning, always already capable of new possibilities of counter-translation. The meanings negotiated and produced in translation are not simply embodied in textual structures alone, but similar to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (where gender is not located on the body), these meanings are located culturally or transculturally, always missing the mark of the original whilst simultaneously calling it into question. In other words, when Butler writes about the impossibility of separating out '"gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained' (Butler 1999: 6), what she is

saying about 'gender' can similarly be said about translation in so far as it exposes the myth of an 'original' textual body and speaks to the uneven correspondence between languages and to translation as a performative act which is always already influenced by culture and not reducible to the textual body. This, in my view, takes the metaphor of femininity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity further and creates a space in between that is amorphous, ambiguous, different, and quite possibly queer.

Speaking of translation and the spaces between multiple languages in the Maghreb, the area in which I am currently working, Abdelkébir Khatibi, in *Maghreb pluriel*, asks us to focus on what cannot be translated directly, that is, on what is deferred, what is absent, what is *untranslatable*. He writes: 'la langue étrangère *transforme* la langue première et la déporte vers l'intraduisible. . .la traduction opère selon cette intraitabilité, cette distanciation sans cesse reculée et disruptive' (Khatibi 1983: 186). [The foreign language *transforms* the first language and moves it toward the untranslatable. . . translation operates according to this untranslatability, this gap [between languages] always being a setback and disruptive—my translation.] In this regard, the translated text no longer forms a dependency on the so-called original text, but actually transforms it, subverting radically the binary between original and copy. Taking this further, Gayatri Spivak sees translation as a form of social activism against the capitalistic conveniences of monolingualism which demand the homogenisation of linguistic differences in a globalised world. She points out, in citing Barbara Cassin, that our obligation to translate should be determined by this idea of the untranslatable as not merely something that one is unable to translate, 'but something one never stops (not) translating' (Spivak 2010: 38), thus hinting again at the performativity of translation itself. And I would surmise that attention to this disruptive, subversive space of indeterminacy between languages, the space of *l'intraduisible*, is a *queer* space, one that challenges any normative idea of straightforward translatability.

But translation also operates at the encounter or contact zone between cultural borders. As I mentioned earlier, translation is a site of both textual and cultural production; therefore, it must not only be conceived of as a linguistic praxis, but one that addresses also the vast system of codes, symbols, and signifying practices we understand as culture. Coming back to my previous example of the affective and erotic bonds between women in Lesotho, Judith Gay, the anthropologist who studied these relationships in the 1980s, has argued that the compatibility of intimate female relationships with heterosexual marriage challenges western insistences on the hetero/homo binary. But her anthropological perspective is somewhat limiting politically and is a case of missing the epistemological pause, or the space of *l'intraduisible* in *cultural* translation, given that one of her conclusions s that same-sex relationships between women in Lesotho point to the growing recognition of bisexuality in the psychosexual literature, which, she claims, is specifically supported in non-western societies (Gay 1986: 111-12). So while Gay applauds how these affective ties between women rupture the western hetero/homo opposition, she still nonetheless 'translates' directly the gender and sexual codes of the West (by referring to the relationships as bisexual) into an indigenous context without sufficiently deconstructing them. This calls to mind Gayatri Spviak's critique of the sex/gender systems of the West as one political economy that plays a role in the ways in which western scholarship acts as a site of discursive (re)recolonisation by assigning 'a static ethnicity to the Other in order to locate critique or confirmation of the most sophisticated thought or act of the West' (Spivak 1999: 110). Can the close, affectionate, and sometimes intimate bonds women in Lesotho share be reduced to bisexuality? Thus, serious questions are raised about the 'translation' of desire from one culture to another and risks repeating the imperialist gesture.

Furthermore, what can the political shifts and recent forms of feminist and lesbian/gay writing in French from the Maghreb tell us about the rupturing of gender and sexual

hegemonies through the mediation of cultures? I don't have the space here to analyse in detail the ways in which new forms of queer francophone writing are located strategically in the gaps between a rich inheritance of languages, cultures, and histories in the Maghreb as a way of (re)negotiating new forms of dissident gender and sexuality. Sexual dissidence has always had a history of representation in relation to the nation-state in francophone literature of the Maghreb; in Rachid Boudjedra's 1969 novel *La Répudiation*, for example, as Jarrod Hayes has argued, sexual resistance is not a mere mimicry of the sexual categories of the West, but may be connected intimately with a critique of the neo-imperialist tendencies of postcolonial nationalism and religious fundamentalism in post-independent Algeria (Hayes 2001: 92). Yet, the negotiation of split subjectivity and borders, geopolitical and otherwise, is strongly evident in the texts of lesbian writer Nina Bouraoui, who is multiply positioned and living in diaspora, asserting in her book *Poupée Bella*, written in the form of a journal: 'J'ai plusieurs vies. J'ai plusieurs corps sous mon corps' (Bouraoui 2004: 21) [I have several lives. I have several bodies under my body—my translation], which confounds singular understandings and simplistic oppositions around sex, gender, and national belonging. In her novel, *Garçon Manqué*. Bouraoui writes:

> Tous les matins je vérifie mon identité. J'ai quatre problèmes. Française? Algérienne? Fille? Garçon? (Bouraoui 2000: 163)
>
> [Every morning I check my identity. I have four problems. French? Algerian? Girl? Boy? (my translation)]

An emphasis here on border encounters, crossings, and forms of cultural mediation between north Africa and Europe, as well as between the binaries of gender, necessitate not only a challenge to the homogenising impulses of postcolonial nationalism in the country of origin, and its hegemonic hold on national belonging, on the one hand, and a queering of an imagined fully integrated Europe, on the other, but cultural translation operating as a strategy of agency and resistance in the spaces *between* two totalising cultural worlds (as well as between the dualism of gender).

Another form of cultural translation as a site of textual and political struggle is evident in the fracturing of traditional cultural distinctions between gender-defined *performances* of homosexuality (active/passive) that seem to have their roots in various forms of Arab Muslim cultural nationalism as the paradigm for sexual relations between Arab Muslim men, on the one hand, and the search for a sexual identity as a *discursive* position (gay, lesbian, queer, etc) not merely reducible to its manifestations in the West. Whilst some work suggests that the active role in male same-sex sexual relations between Arab Muslim men fulfils the same sexual position of virile masculinity within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, and the passive role is seen as a betrayal of manhood and male power and is therefore stigmatised (see Murray and Roscoe 1997), Joseph Massad, in his book *Desiring Arabs*, whilst seeming to question this as strictly paradigmatic, nonetheless makes use of the active/passive binary himself in describing social and sexual configurations of desire in Arab Muslim societies which he accuses the Gay International of destroying (Massad 2007: 188-89). He also uses such terms as practitioners of 'same-sex contact' to describe sexual relations between Arab Muslim men in contradistinction to the taking on of a sexual identity by gay men in the West, since according to Massad, the hetero/homo distinction did not emerge historically or culturally out of Arab Muslim societies but is a distinctly western (i.e. foreign) phenomenon (Massad 2007: 173; 41). Despite Massad's eloquent and well-researched history of

homosexuality in the Arab Muslim world, he still, nonetheless, maintains a problematic occident/orient opposition that does not entertain the possibilities of reciprocal interchange or cultural mediation through the effects of international travel, the media, the internet, and social networking sites. For Massad, cultural translation would be reducible to the tainting of a supposedly pre-existent cultural purity of Arab Muslim culture through the hegemonic filter of western taxonomies of sexual identities. Yet, if we accept that translation is never a straightforward, linear operation, but is always already a form of cross-cultural negotiation, this opens up new spaces for the (re)negotiation of dissident sexualities that are reducible *neither* to western understandings of sexual identity, *nor* to simplistic understandings of active and passive homosexuality, including Massad's rather static embrace of non-identitarian, even perfunctory, sexual bonds between Arab Muslim men. Massad seems to hold up still the occident/orient binary as a way of preserving the specificity of Arab Muslim culture and resisting the ideological penetration of western hegemony. But the more crucial question to be asking is: *Can any cultural system be purely itself and none other?*

Tunisian-French writer Eyet-Chékib Djaziri addresses this very struggle and renegotiation of dissident sexuality in his novel *Un poisson sur la balançoire*. The young protagonist, Sofiène, seems to occupy early in the novel the space between gender. Two boys he meets on the street see Sofiène and say, 'Regard ce qui arrive! C'est un garcon ou c'est une fille?' (Djaziri 2001a: 30) [Look at who's here! Is this a boy or a girl?—my translation]. At first, Sofiène seems to take on the more passive role in his affective and sexual ties with boys, exchanging kisses with them, referred to as *poissons* to veil their forbidden nature. Here the French term *poisson* cannot simply be translated into English as 'fish' as the term is acting as a site of resistance to social surveillance and social prohibitions of homoerotic desire between men; thus understanding *poissons* as kisses exposes translation as a performative site where diverse social tasks are performed, as Porter has argued, and as a

transcultural practice rather than merely being a linear process of finding equivalents for messages in another linguistic code. Yet the shape of the lips in forming the utterance *poisson* forms the shape of a kiss; or, the connection can be to the shape of the mouths of some fish as they swim or feed which resembles the shape and motion of a human kiss. In either case, this is a form of cultural translation not determined by the linguistic code alone or even by prevailing cultural codes, but by the overdetermination of lips which incite and symbolise homoerotic desire. In the sequel to *Un poisson sur la balançoire,* entitled *Une promesse de douleur et de sang,* Sofiène moves to Cherbourg in France to live with his grandparents and continue his schooling. Required by his French teacher to study Molière's *Malade imaginare* by performing various scenes with a partner, Sofiène works with Sébastien to whom he is attracted. While rehearsing a scene from the play, Sofiène observes Sébastien:

Je n'écoute plus les paroles qi'il prononce. Seule sa voix résonne à mes oreilles tandis que mon regard s'attache à ses lèvres qui remuent. . . . J'observe sa peau, blanche et fine. . . . Mes yeux remontent de nouveau vers ses lèvres au moment où, d'un mouvement de la langue, il les humidifie. Mon soudain silence l'intrigue. Il lève les yeux du livret et dit

--Qu'y a-t-il? Tu ne continues pas? Pouquoi me regardes-tu ainsi?

San réflechir, n'y tenant plus, je réponds:

--Donne-moi un *poisson*!

--Un quoi?

--Un *poisson,* je répète patiemment comme si je m'adresse à un enfant ou à quelqu'un qui ne parlerait pas ma langue.

--Comment ça, un poisson? réplique-t-il ahuri.

--Comme ça! dis-je, en approchant mon visage, n'arrêtant mes lèvres qu'aux abords des siennes. (Djaziri 2001b: 14-15)

[I no longer listen to the words that he is pronouncing. Only his voice resounds in my ears while I'm watching his lips which are moving. . . .I observe his skin, white and pure. . . . My eyes move up again toward his lips, at the moment where the movement of the tongue moistens them. My sudden silence intrigues him. He lifts his eye from the booklet and says:

--What is it? You don't continue? Why are you looking at me like that?

Without thinking, no longer holding back, I reply:

--Give me a fish!

--A what?

--A fish, I repeat patiently as if I am speaking to a child or to someone who does not speak my language.

--How do you mean, a fish? he answers back bewildered?

--Like this, I say, approaching with my face, stopping only when my lips meet his. (my translation)]

Even though both speak the same language, Sofiène remarks that he feels as if he is addressing someone who does not speak his language because Sébastien does not share the cultural code that aligns *poisson* with a secret, transgressive kiss between men.

Coming back to Sofiène's younger days in *Un poisson sur la balançoire*, while he is still in Tunisia, the gendered roles of active/passive, which have historically been deemed

paradigmatic of sexual relations between Arab Muslim men seem, at first, very much inscribed in Sofiène's relations with other boys and men and is also inscribed textually. Yet this is by no means the full picture, though it serves as an anchoring point for same-sex relations between Arab Muslim men specifically in the Maghreb. Through Sofiène, Djaziri later writes in the novel:

> Il est vrai que les mentalités ici sont ainsi faites que celui qui a le rôle actif ne perd rien de sa virilité et peut même raconter ses exploits, il n'en sera qu'applaudi, encouragé. L'homme qui aura eu le rôle passif se verra, lui, traité de pédé et sera méprisé. D'où ma surprise de constater qu'une interversion des rôles existait sous d'autres cieux, avec Frédéric par exemple. (Djaziri 2001a: 70)

> [It is true that thinking here is so wrapped up with the man who is active, losing none of his virility, and even being able to talk about his conquests—this in fact will be applauded, encouraged. The man who takes the passive role will find himself treated with contempt as queer. Imagine my surprise to find out that a switching of these roles existed elsewhere, as with Frédéric, for example. (my translation)]

Here there is a hint to an opening of another kind of sexual intimacy between men with an *interchange* of sexual roles not prescribed in advance through binary taxonomies of gender. More importantly in both novels, there are imaginative and actual crossings of borders, between France and Tunisia (given also that Djaziri's mother is French and his father Tunisian and that he learned to oscillate between both cultural worlds, living both in France

and Tunisia), between masculinity and femininity, between active and passive, between self and other, as well as locations in the liminal spaces *between* these binary oppositions where agency and resistance reside in the struggle to attempt to name one's relation to the world. At the same time, this location in the space between two cultural worlds is potentially transformative of fixed national and cultural hegemonies in the West *and* in the Maghreb and is neither a simple capitulation to the sexual categories of the West, nor to the forces of economic globalisation, but shows that *multiple* and hybrid forms of same-sex sexual desires can co-exist within the same culture, *both* in the performative *and* in the discursive sense, and come about relationally in the dialogical encounter between Africa and Europe in both societies, rather than in the sense of progressive modernity, where one cultural model of sexuality is simply thought to replace a more pre-modern, more primitive form. More interesting, these slippages of signification, these differences, these crossings, these anti-normative spaces where contradictory meanings emerge are creating new linguistic terms. According to gay Moroccan writer, Abdellah Taïa, in an interview with Marc Endeweld in *Minorités*, there has been a shift in the Maghreb, especially in Morocco, from the use of the Arabic term *zamel*, which Taïa translates as *pédé passif* (a passive homosexual in a pejorative sense), to *mathali*, an invented, more neutral term to designate a gay man in Arabic without reference to gendered active/passive roles.[2]

Both 'queer' and translation mediate between hegemonically defined spaces, and their critical conjunction offers the possibility of new sites of heterogeneity and difference as a vital heuristic for the work that we do in comparative literary and cultural studies. The work of translation, like the work of 'queer,' is never finished as both modes of enquiry are committed to the endless proliferation of difference(s). Both are invested in setting aside understandings of our own cultural worlds and in creating critical discursive spaces for others to speak and be heard. Queer is not simply about sexual rights in the same way that

translation is not simply about seeking equivalences in one language from another, and the critical conjunction of translation and queer studies offers broadened opportunities for civic engagement and citizenship in a transnational world, as well as an important tool for knowledge production about sexual difference and for the decolonisation of desire.

Notes

[1] Think, for instance, of looking up a word (a signifier) in the dictionary for its meaning (what it signifies); indeed, the definitions of the word you find (assumed to be signifieds) are really made up of other words (that is, signifers), and none of the definitions coalesce completely with the meaning of the original word looked up in the dictionary. There will always be a space or a gap or space of indeterminacy between them, a space of excess. And to talk about these definitions (which are really other signifiers) requires other words, and so on. There is a trace of meaning in this chain of signifiers that links them together, but any full, final, fixed meaning is always already deferred. But Derrida's point would be that signification operates through a process of translating one signifier into another. As Derrida writes, 'the signifier first signifies a signifier, and not the thing itself or a directly presented signified' (Derrida 1976: 237). In this sense, then, signification is an endless play of substitutions or translations: 'the signified is originally and essentially . . . trace, that it is *always already in the position of the signifier*' (Derrida 1976: 73). Translation work, then, is more than a system of equivalences across languages, but also operates on the level of the signifier and the systematic play of differences which defer or postpone any final, straightforward, or transcendental meaning.

[2] From the interview Taïa states: 'Je constate que l'homosexualité est passée de «zamel» (pédé passif) à «mathali» (mot neutre inventé, il y a trois ans pour designer en arabe un homosexuel).' See Endeweld 2009.

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